

**stop and rewind by stardustupinlights**

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**Summary:**

Ryoken explores his feelings as Yusaku has a panic attack, and decides it's best to forget about everything good about their afternoon. This is not a good decision, but Ryoken's past making good life choices (except he isn't).

(It is necessary to read my other work on this series to understand this.)

**Relationships:** Fujiki Yuusaku/Revolver | Kougami Ryouken

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## stop and rewind

### Author's Note:

Well, as you can see, I decided to revisit this and give Ryoken's perspective of Yusaku's panic attack from chapter five a shot. This has been sitting in my drafts for a long while, and it may not be as good as my original work, but I hope you guys enjoy either way :)

Ryoken has been reading the same file for about ten minutes now without processing any of the words. He's ashamed of it, but between the cold and the sight of Yusaku slowly turning into a burrito behind him, he's not being good at maintaining any focus. It doesn't help that Ghost Girl doesn't know what efficient organization is, and he's not one bit surprised about why she has so many enemies now. If he had paid any money for this, he'd be absolutely furious about the result, instead of mildly annoyed. They'll never get this done at this rate, and he's starting to feel victimized by his own decisions.

What's new, really?

He's extremely grateful by the interruption of Yusaku's frustration with their task, and Ryoken asks him about his progress only to then go off in a tangent about the importance of being a good hacker and mercenary to maintain a good business in both the real and cybernetic world, things that Ghost Girl truly is not, considering that she basically downloaded all of SOL's correspondence of the last year and barely managed to slap some dates in there. He does this mostly to hide the fact that he's not doing anything at all, but also because he needs to vent, but quickly realizes that Yusaku has a glazed look in his eye, and stops, raising his eyebrows at him.

"Are you listening to me?" He asks, just a bit annoyed by his companion ignoring him, and Yusaku blinks slowly at him before answering.

"No, you're ranting." And then closes his eyes. "I think the amount of empty information were processing is getting to you."

"How rude," Ryoken stares, talking softly and mostly to himself, a bit mesmerized by the peaceful expression on Yusaku's face, and stands up to approach him as soon as he notices his breathing deepening, a clear indicator that he might fall asleep. Leaning on the couch, Ryoken peers down at him, and tries to keep any amusement out of his voice. "Are you going to take a break?"

Yusaku opens his eyes and gives him this look, nose scrunching up adorably in thought, and Ryoken just... keeps staring for a few seconds, waiting for him to say something, glancing recklessly at the details of his face, the light mole resting in the corner of his left eye, the remains of what looks like eyeliner in his waterline, the softness of his hair and the brightness of his eyes. It's not long before he realizes that Yusaku spaces out on him, and he sighs before talking, trying to bring him back. He really shouldn't be watching him so closely.

"You're spacing out— I think you're the one who needs a break," he says, and Yusaku's eyes snap back to his face, blinking heavily. He yawns, and it's the most adorable thing Ryoken's seen, not deterred by the blankness of his voice when he asks him if he wants coffee. He's not surprised at all that Yusaku relies on pure black coffee to have energy through the day, and he guesses the cold must factor into that somehow.

Still, Ryoken is not capable of drinking black coffee without cringing and forcing it down, so, trying to keep his voice neutral as possible, but still feeling a bit worried about it, he asks if he only has black.

Yusaku shoots him an almost incredulous look, almost, the slightest twitch of his eyes giving him away. "I have some milk and sugar around... but I don't know how old the milk is."

He walks into the kitchen as he says this, and Ryoken stares at the TV, where the cleaning robot is watching that same show Spectre and Aso liked to discuss at times, in pure fear. Is he willing to drink bad milk for the sake of not having black coffee? Perhaps. Is he perturbed and a bit worried about Yusaku living in such poor conditions to the point in which there's no heating, and by the fact that he doesn't know whether his food is bad or not? Definitely.

“You don’t know if it’s expired?” Ryoken watches him shrug in response, and resists the urge to shake him violently to snap some sense of self-preservation into him. He can't help but ask: “Be honest, do you usually live like this?”

Ryoken listens to his explanation about not being in his apartment enough lately to clean and staying over at Soulburner's place with a feeling of dread settling in his stomach. This, at least, is marginally better than Yusaku just not caring about himself, but only a bit.

“My apartment has actually been kind of a mess this last few weeks because of that, but our meeting motivated me to clean this morning— Roboppy was delighted to have some use again,” Yusaku continues, and Ryoken takes in a soft breath, imagines Yusaku cleaning with an apron wrapped around his neck and back, the cleaning robot right by his side to help him reach right corners, bending over to look under his bed—

*Yeah, ok, that's enough of that,* he thinks, and tries to deflect the conversation to other places. For example, he's curious about their little call last night, because something about it does not add up.

“... Glad to be of service, then,” his voice is perhaps a bit strangled when he talks next, but Yusaku doesn't seem to notice, rather staring down at the water he's boiling. “Did you really accidentally butt dialed me, by the way?”

At this, his posture changes, and he sees the tip of his ears turn pink. Oh, ok, what the fuck? His reaction is only made worse in Ryoken's eyes by the awkwardness of him clearing his throat.

“Yeah, that’s what happened. I had just arrived home and forgot to take my phone out of my pocket when I sat down,” he pauses, and Ryoken blinks incredulously. “Just an accident.”

“Hm, that’s...” bullshit, he doesn't say, because he has seen Yusaku's phone; in fact, it was lying on the counter behind his owner right now, and it's one of those sturdy old smartphones that probably has no space left because of software updates and could take a beating, and it looked almost brand new,

so he knew there was no way Yusaku accidentally called him by just sitting on it. Still, he decides not to call him out on it, if only because it's clear Yusaku doesn't want to call about the series of events that led up to that.

Instead, he gestures towards the fridge, just as Yusaku turns to look at him. "May I open your fridge to check the milk?"

Yusaku stares back and forth between the fridge and Ryoken and then nods, a movement that seems almost unconscious from the rest of his body. "Sure. Mugs are on the cupboard beside it, so you can put those out as well."

Ryoken opens the fridge, expecting to find it empty or even dirty, but finds it half full and moderately clean, with a few take out leftovers, some supermarket cheese, and ham, vegetables that seem to still be edible, a couple of jars of extra light pancakes and waffles instant mix - at this, he shivers, thinking about them not having much sugar and tasting like cardboard - peanut butter, the milk he's looking for, and, surprisingly, one plastic jar filled with brown liquid that he hopes is tea.

Instead of staring for too long though, Ryoken grabs the milk, takes a good whiff, does it again more deeply, and then stares down the open corner. It doesn't seem to be perfect, but it's certainly edible, and he trusts his stomach to be strong enough to handle it either way. He needs the coffee.

"Smells fine, so if I get sick, it was at my own risk," he says when he notices Yusaku's staring, and then turns back to open the cupboard he was pointed to, grabbing two mugs at random. Yusaku, curiously, seemed to have more mugs than necessary for only one person, and Ryoken grinned softly to himself when he saw a Playmaker themed cup shoved in the back, wondering if this was also a gift from Shima Naoki, or from someone else, because he doubted Yusaku bought it for himself.

"Cheers to that," he hears Yusaku whisper, grumpily, and watches him space out again, as he leaves the mugs beside him on the counter, instant coffee mix right by his left hand, and thinks that this can't be good or normal. Perhaps Yusaku was much more tired than he looked or claimed, but there wasn't much Ryoken could do about it. What could he say? Go to

bed? If he did, Yusaku would most certainly take it the wrong way, and it wasn't like he had a right to tell him when to rest or not either way.

Suddenly hearing a bubbling noise, Ryoken glances down at the pot, watching it boil, and then back to Yusaku, to see if there's any response. When he notices none, he frowns, thinking about how dangerous this would be if he weren't there to supervise.

“Yusaku,” Ryoken starts, and Yusaku very nearly jumps. He tries to not appear as conflicted as he is because he's noticed that Yusaku is pretty jumpy when he's not totally aware of his surroundings, and it makes his heartache, for a reason he's not willing to examine. Once he's sure his eyes are on him, he points out: “The water’s boiling.”

“Shit,” Yusaku whispers, quickly turning back to the stove to turn it off, biting his lip in concentration as he pours it out and mixes in the instant coffee, all but pushing a mug towards Ryoken once it's ready. He sees him take a sip without blowing on it, or even adding some small amount of sugar, and can't help but let his face twist in mildly sympathy and condolence for his taste buds. He's more disgusted that he will admit. “Sugar’s on the plastic container beside the stove. Go wild, I'll be back in a bit.”

Ryoken watches him step out of the kitchen and into the hallway a bit bewildered, and then figured he might be going to freshen up a bit, maybe knock the sleep out of his system, and the idea makes Ryoken vaguely consider the thought of Yusaku self-medicating, and then scratches it out in his head— Yusaku seems to be very responsible, and even if he would try that, he would probably have realized pretty soon that if therapy and actually medical prescriptions did nothing for him, then neither would any research into the safe way to self-medicate, much less taking the trouble to actually do it.

Still, as much as he believes and trusts that Yusaku isn't risking himself like that, he makes a mental note to look into the movements of his bank account savings, to know what exactly he's buying on a day to day basis. If he's using cash, he won't be able to trace it as easily, but it'll have to do for now. Locating the sugar and pouring around three spoonfuls in, he then

adds the milk until the mug is full to the brim, and swallows some of it down after blowing softly. It's not that bad, but... Well, instant coffee with suspicious milk isn't going to be Starbucks coffee material, not that he was that fond of most of their drinks but it's better than nothing.

He moves to grab his laptop and move to the couch, and starts reading the document he was stuck in earlier, but just as he settles in, Yusaku reappears and goes to sit beside him, dropping something on the couch to sit on, instantly making his focus drop to the ground. Ryoken only watches from the corner of his eye, keeping his face towards his laptop screen, and doesn't make any movement or sound until Yusaku himself breaks the silence.

“Already back at it?” he asks, settling in beside him, and Ryoken unconsciously tenses up when their elbows almost graze against each other's. He determines, not for the first time today, that his behavior is pathetic and embarrassing. What would his father say about this, sipping coffee on his enemy's couch? He would be ashamed.

“There's no time to waste, and the sun is already going down,” Ryoken glances at him, takes a long sip from his mug, and immediately narrows his eyes in thought, lips twisting as he considers the taste. That's not the only thing that gives him pause though, as he suddenly starts feeling heat creep up on him from Yusaku's side of the couch, and most notably, his backside. A million possibilities run through his mind at that, and then he remembers the piece of fabric he saw Yusaku sitting on, and almost sighs in relief. “I don't think that milk was as good as I believed. Are you sitting on a heating pad?”

Yusaku, staring right at his TV and clearly unimpressed with his realization, snorts, a sound that's so unrestrained and seemingly natural that Ryoken thinks back to their day, wondering if he heard it before. “Yeah, I am. Why do you ask?”

“Because I can feel it,” Ryoken says, feeling like that that should be obvious, dropping any pretense that he's not actively watching him closely. And then, because he's curious and can't help himself: “Do you use these often?”



Yusaku seems to falter slightly, quickly glancing down at his laptop and then back at the TV, and Ryoken suddenly wants to take his question back. “During the winter only. Does it bother you? I can turn down the heat a bit —”

Panicked, Ryoken interrupts him, shaking his head and looking back at his laptop. The last thing he wants is Yusaku giving up any comfort for him. “It’s fine, I was just wondering.”

He feels Yusaku staring at him, probably confused or insulted by this seemingly strange interaction, but he says nothing, and Ryoken finally feels like he can breathe again when he looks away, starting to click look through the files. Ryoken follows his lead and shifts in his seat, slumping slightly against the cushions and focusing on the tech support report he was reading, quickly skipping it to read another, desperate to find something at least. Yusaku's couch is not really that comfortable, at least not much more than the high chair he was sitting on was earlier was, the cushions well-worn and the color fading, a few stains here and there that looked like there was probably an attempt to wash them without success. He wondered vaguely, as he skipped tech report after tech report, just how much of the furniture in Yusaku's apartment was from the leftovers of previous owners and the landlord himself, and figured, as he glanced at the wooden coffee table and the TV stand, that were matching sets and just as scrubbed off of paint as the walls, that all of them were. He at least hoped his mattress was not as cheap or second hand as the rest of this furniture.

“I found something,” Yusaku calls, tone flat, and Ryoken eyes the timestamp on his laptop to see it's already been an hour. And he's still reading tech reports. He was never hiring Ghost Girl to do something for him ever. “Seems like a progress report on the blueprints for a ‘new device that will lead humanity towards a new era.’ Yikes. The blueprint is not on this particular folder, but I do remember Takeru pointing out that he saw some on another one.”

Ah, so Soulburner was helping. No wonder they were so behind, then.

“Interesting. Is there any reference number on it?” Ryoken leans over him to look at his at his screen, peaking at the document and reading what it

said. It does seem to be written by someone who seriously thinks this is the invention of the century, and he very nearly rolls his eyes. He catches the sound of Yusaku humming almost happily, and blinks at the screen, wondering if he imagined it, finally drawing back to his spot. “So, no reference number... really, how did Ghost Girl even organize this?”

He refused to stop complaining about Ghost Girl's lack of organizational skills. He should sue her, really. Yusaku validates this thought by agreeing that she definitely only slapped some dates on things and left it at that, and then stretches his arms with a loud crack from several of his bones, his torso looking way too delicate as he does for Ryoken's liking.

“Wait a second, I need to talk with Takeru.”

They were doomed. Ryoken did not know much about Soulburner's hate relationship with technology, but he's heard Spectre complaining about him after his tasks with him were done enough times to know that it was unreasonably frustrating.

"What for?" He asks, weary, not keeping his displeasure from his voice. Yusaku stands up, and it takes him three full minutes to untangle himself without dropping his laptop.

“Well, he looked over some blueprints— he might remember the folder name, or perhaps even the date,” Yusaku reasons, hurrying to grab his phone and come back to what Ryoken can only call his nest. He accepts his explanation and even agrees with him, crossing his arms in thought. He sees Yusaku glances down at the gesture with a funny face, but just a quick he starts looking for his partner's number.

“Hey, Yusaku! What’s up!?”

Oh, sweet mercy. Soulburner talked like he was a grandpa that was still learning how phone calls work, screaming into the microphone. Yusaku, somehow, barely flinches at this, and is quick to get right to the point, something Ryoken is thankful for, and he respects his bravery at dealing with a technology illiterate dumbass.

“Ah, Yusaku, are you seriously looking through all that stuff again? By yourself?” Soulburner practically whines and Ryoken almost wants to take the phone and say 'I'm here' just because he knows it would piss him off. Yusaku releasing a deep sigh, staring blankly ahead, tells him he might be having similar thoughts. “I thought you were just going to stream the Link VRAINS Christmas Event!”

Ryoken could, perhaps, very reluctantly, pride himself on his quick thinking under pressure – Spectre must be rolling his eyes somewhere without knowing why – but he’s not prepared for the mental image of Fujiki Yusaku, Playmaker, Link VRAINS’s savior, streaming a Christmas event that has the worse rewards Ryoken’s ever seen. It makes him choke on his own aborted laugh, and once he’s able to stop coughing, he notices Yusaku glaring at him furiously, even as he gives Soulburner a defensive answer.

What develops next is something Ryoken is not comfortable listening in. The way Yusaku’s voice shifts to something more calm once the conversation is forcibly changed by Soulburner to the events of the day, while still hardly expressive, is a bit more intimate than he was expecting it to be, and he tries to block it out to give them some privacy, but it’s like the low rumble of Yusaku’s unbothered, non-self-conscious words call for him, makes him feel a bit of oddly placed jealousy and longing, a mix than in anyone else would have been easily understood, but made Ryoken frown when paired with his usual inner conflict.

“...feel a cold coming. I think I’ll have to head out to buy some medicine soon, but other than that, I didn’t do much,” Ryoken processed the words, thought about his previous mental note to check Yusaku’s back account movements, and nodded to himself. Over the next week, if he sees something suspicious about whatever medicine he decides to buy, he’ll do something about it. He’s not sure why or what, but he will. “Well, I did leave Ai locked on Café Nagi’s desk drawer, so—”

Ryoken’s laptop almost falls off his lap at that, because of the way he quite suddenly jerked his leg in surprise, an odd reaction, but what was he supposed to do when learning the Dark Ignis was locked away in a drawer inside a hotdog truck? This is fantastic, Spectre will be absolutely delighted and then probably suggest they sneak in and steal it, but Ryoken finds

himself just relishing in the thought of that annoying thing being locked in a place where he wouldn't be a nuisance. Besides, it would be of bad faith to steal it in the middle of a truce.

Ryoken sighed, settling back against the couch cushions, and thought, has he heard Soulburner laugh about it the Dark Ignis's predicament, that this was a really domestic image, him sitting right next to Yusaku, and different from the normal he was used to. This sense of domesticity was not something he was used to seeing in anyone except Spectre, Kyoko, and Aso, Genome recently added to that pile because of the "we're living together in a boat" thing, and even then, his father's former companions weren't really 'domestic', treating almost everything with the same air of professionalism as always. And well, Spectre just wasn't like this— his free afternoons normally got dedicated to the garden at the mansion, so Ryoken barely saw any of him throughout the day, and more recently they just sat on the captain cabin and talked about their decks, making changes here and there in preparation for the Light Ignis's attack. It's surprising to realize he almost forgot what it feels like to have a normal afternoon like this, and the casualness of sitting right next to Yusaku while he talks on the phone about his day is... nice. Peaceful. Just what he wanted when he decided to get away from everyone for the day.

A cruel dangling of what he could have was he not himself.

Soulburner's monologue about his feelings towards Yusaku only make his unwarranted jealousy even worse, and in turn, that makes him feel a bit erratic, like a string toy about to snap. It's no wonder Yusaku gives him a weird look, because his face feels like an open book right now, and in a desperate attempt to keep himself together, he makes a jab about the Dark Ignis.

"So..." He shifts his voice to something he thinks might be casual and airy, but the twist of Yusaku's mouth tells him he failed. "You left the Ignis in a drawer."

The rapidness with which Yusaku's ears turn red is very interesting, and so is the little sound he makes before answering. "Look, I was very busy—"

“Sure,” Ryoken can’t help but chuckle— riling him up was way too easy, easier than it should ever be, but Ryoken still feels put out by his own internal musings about Soulburner, and the sheer domesticity of their conversation. He tries to tell himself he’s not jealous – since when has he needed or craved something like that, anyway? – but it’s hard to convince himself of it when spiteful words are crawling up his throat. He tries to compromise by sating his curiosity: “So, you and Soulburner, uh?”

Yusaku stares at him like he suddenly grew another head. “Takeru and I what?”

*Abort, abort, abort*, he thinks, alarm bells telling him he’s surfing through very dangerous territory. This was, perhaps, not a good idea; he shouldn’t even be questioning the nature of Yusaku’s relationship with Homura Takeru— if they weren’t a thing that was fine, wonderful, perfect, but if they were— well, that’s none of his business, even if it does makes him feel irrationally victimized, but he needs to get his mind off those things, they have much more important matters at hand anyway.

"You know what, never mind. What did he say about the blueprints?" Yusaku’s naivety was a saving grace right now, as it keeps him from further questioning Ryoken and driving him into a corner, apparently deciding to just ignore Ryoken’s backtrack to get to work.

Soulburner’s directions are actually very helpful after all— Ryoken can admit without issue that he had no hope to get something out of this afternoon, but never out loud. If his father could see him now, he would be agonizing over his complete lack of efficiency and scolding him about his attachment to the enemy. Ryoken appreciates those thoughts for about four seconds before they actually make shame crawl up his spine—shouldn’t he be doing his own thing without looking over his shoulder and expect his father to be there, directing his path? He thought he was over it, but apparently, three months of doing what he would have wanted him to do were not enough to grieve him, and much less get rid of his influence over his actions. Ryoken wants to guide Hanoi using methods that won’t make him choke on his own guilt at night more than he already does, not involving naïve people to be his lackeys, not taking the fight outside of Link VRAINS, giving human life more value than his father ever did

despite his attempts to save mankind, so he shouldn't be letting him creep on his memory like this— it will only make matters worse for his conscience in the future. He wants to think that his father would be proud, perhaps even happy, that Ryoken is trying to not live under his shadow, but he knows better— for all he loves his father and all that his father loved him, he's aware that his ego goes beyond that love, and that while he wouldn't be completely disappointed in his efforts, he also wouldn't be completely pleased.

Ryoken is not surprised that SOL Technologies jumped on the AI bandwagon as soon as the event of the Tower of Hanoi came to an end. He guessed it wasn't easy to juggle the reconstruction of Link VRAINS with the testing stages of their prototype, and as such, it made sense for them to get Go Onizuka working with them, first as a bounty hunter and then as a lab rat. Onizuka was just the perfect subject, after all—a fallen star, someone who was on the top and had everything he could ever wish for but that eventually got burned by the new arising competition that Playmaker posed, a new threat among the ever-increasing number of charisma duelists that didn't stand a chance to his experience. A man that was driven by his wish for revenge and self-fulfillment— Ryoken feels like he's heard this story way too many times in his short life.

The video files, though—they make something heavy settle in his chest, dread making him wary hyper-aware that these are not going to be nice. His source at SOL was not shy about telling him some things he kept to himself about Onizuka's involvement and determination, and he could only imagine what that will look like on video. There's also the fact that Ryoken is not dealing with just one victim here—Yusaku is right there, after all, sitting on his heating path and looking down at his screen with apprehension. His attempt to make things feel less nerve-wracking is not very good.

“I'll be fine,” he insists, narrowing his eyes in determination, but Ryoken is not convinced. Several things could go wrong, and no matter how stubborn Yusaku was, stubborn enough to match him at every step, that was not enough to just push through something like this— but Ryoken needs to see those videos to claim that the day was not wasted, that his break from reality wasn't in vain, and taking away Yusaku's agency over his own

decisions makes him feels like that's way too reminiscent of someone giving a child a candy just to take it away, but the child, in this case, was Yusaku, who would probably find his own way of recovering that candy by himself. Which was worse, then: to allow Yusaku to put himself through something like this, or to take it away, only for him to look it up by himself, when there would be no one to warn him or help him if things turned ugly?

Swallowing, Ryoken decides to take the risk. "Ok, but if it becomes too much—"

"I'll stop." Yusaku interrupts him, apparently eager to start, and Ryoken shoots him a look that he hopes is as firm as he intended.

"We will stop, and I will take the information away for my Knights to look over," Ryoken says, deciding that this was a compromise—a poor one, but a compromise nonetheless. "I won't take all copies away, of course, but we need to all be in a good state of mind. We're only humans, but we can't let this hold us back, for all of our sakes."

Yusaku agrees, looking through the files to find something recent on the testing, and clicking on a random video with a date to match the timeframe they set. They see exactly what Ryoken expected— Go Onizuka plugged into a Dueling Simulation machine modified to serve as the ideal testing grounds for his squeaky new brain implant, a faint scar that is probably gone by now visible as he moves his head to the side.

The scientist in charge lists off the current information about the testing— this is most likely not SOL's first human experimentation prototype, which is hardly a surprise, because his father must have gotten the idea from somewhere. The reminder that Go Onizuka is barely a year older than him is upsetting as much as it is uncomfortable and admirable— Onizuka build an empire on his name through his dueling only to throw it all away at the first sign of his dominance not being enough. Ryoken focuses in on the video, taking in how the testing is proceeding, and for about the first four minutes, he fails to notice that anything is wrong, but the moment he feels Yusaku tensing and his breath quickening, he knows he fucked up.

He should have known, he thinks, from the moment Onizuka's screams started and it was clear that the testing was probably non-coincidentally modeled after the Hanoi Project that this was going to end badly. He curses himself in his head, too inside his own mind and absorbing the provided knowledge given by the events on screen. It isn't until a pitiful, choked off sound leaves Yusaku throat that he actually turns to look, believing his freezing an initial reaction to the horror, and the glazed over, terrified, disoriented look he gets makes all the air in his lungs rush out of him in one gasp, while Yusaku starts shaking slightly and looking around the screen, tears filling his eyes in what is clearly panic, confusing, recognition, going into hyperventilation faster than Ryoken knew was possible.

He sees Yusaku bringing his hand up to his face, nails scratching the skin like it itches, and Ryoken panics and slams the laptop closed, not thinking clearly about the repercussions of it, and suffers for it when Yusaku jumps into the air, making him use his other hand to grab him and try to stop him from either falling or hurting himself, and fails at both when the laptop on his hand unbalances him and they stumble onto the ground, hand still gripping Yusaku's forearm. He lands on his ass, hears the noise Yusaku's body makes against the floor and his blood runs cold, thinking back to watching a similar scenario through lab cameras and holding back tears of despair, and he much feels like regressing back to that mindset because he's scared. He's not equipped to deal with this, he was never allowed to help Spectre with his nightmares even, and he dealt with his own in solitude because it's what he deserves. He doesn't know what to do apart from gripping Yusaku's arm in an iron grip that will probably leave him bruised to keep him from scrambling away in fear and try to pull him closer, dropping the laptop on the ground without a thought. What can he do? What did someone like Yusaku need to calm himself down, to relax and for fuck's sake, breathe, please, goddamn it, he doesn't know *what to do*—

The idea comes to him in a rush, and he hates himself immediately for it, his face twisting to form an expression he can't process through the alarm bells running through his head telling him not to do this.

*But what other choice does he has?*



Gearing himself up internally, Ryoken clears his throat, almost laughing without humor at this image: Yusaku, struggling, Ryoken, preparing to drop all facades of not caring that's he has hidden behind the whole day. But alas, Ryoken will hate himself later and take it out by glaring out at the sea, knowing he's not going to sleep a wink.

"Hey, you," Yusaku freezes, the effect of the words immediate, even as his eyes search blindly, more distressed sounds escaping his lips, still trying to twist his arm away, and he continues, words burning his throat. "Hey, you. Think of three reasons."

Yusaku's eyes are not focused when Ryoken looks closely into them, but he seems to be struggling to stay still, unconsciously, perhaps through years of practice, trying to calm himself down by latching onto the only outside stimulation he's getting. Despite this, Yusaku tries to bring his arm up to his face again and Ryoken squeezes, feeling the delicate bone and skin underneath, and leaving Yusaku bruised by his own hand would be the cherry on top of the cake, wouldn't it? His gasping and twisting, the terror, the erratic rise and fall of his chest...

Ryoken feels like he's the one doing this to him, and the thought settles in his mind with dull acceptance.

"Three reasons?" Yusaku finally gasps out, and Ryoken almost tears up in relief. His voice is panicked, broken, not at all like the usual strength and gentleness behind it, and he feels his chest constricting painfully. As Yusaku stills even further, Ryoken drops his forearm but grabs his shoulder and pulls him closer, resisting the unwelcome urge to hug him, because he has no right to, no place here, this isn't his spot to take, he's not the right person to do this. Someone like Soulburner or Kusanagi Shoichi should be the ones pulling him back from this, not him, a big part of the reason, if not the reason he's even suffering.

Ryoken thinks back on an innocent playdate turned askew and struggles to keep his voice steady enough to talk softly, turning into a whisper. "Three reasons, Yusaku. Three reasons to relax, three reasons to breathe in, three reasons to stay still," a pause with no answer, so he tries again. "Can you try to spell them out for me?"

“Three reasons?” Yusaku repeats, and Ryoken closes his eyes for a second, nodding to himself. He needs to get through this.

“Yes, Yusaku, three reasons. For anything.”

“Anything?”

“Yes.” He’s begging now, but he can hardly care.

“I— one, to uncover the mysteries of my past,” Wait, no, please, not *that*—  
“Two, to take revenge on those who hurt us. Three...”

Yusaku drifts off, and for a moment Ryoken panics, thinking that he’s lapsing back, but a quick look tells him he’s just readjusting, clarity coming back to him in what’s probably a confusing manner. He can only imagine how he would feel in his place, and the thought makes him want to slap himself— comparing his own mental stability, no matter how shaky at times, with Yusaku’s lack of a strong foundation that isn’t based off his own need for survival and the speech pattern Ryoken accidentally pushed on him is superfluous, ridiculous and just downright disrespectful. Still, with these observations running around in his head, Yusaku still hasn’t reacted beyond the gradual slowdown of his heart rate, so he needs to leave that behind for a second to help him push through.

“What was the third, Yusaku?”

It takes him a while, longer than it probably feels for him, to answer the question. Ryoken feels the fight leaving him as he waits and watches Yusaku’s breathing go back to something normal, feels relief even as the words Yusaku whispers as he comes to himself hurt him like a bullet wound would, hitting him right in the heart.

“... to save the one who saved me.”

Yusaku opens his eyes, looks around the room, and then meets his own. It is in this moment that Ryoken knows he needs to leave, as he schools his no doubt open, upset expression back into something less violently honest, mindful of Yusaku’s need to get acquainted with his surroundings. Ryoken

feels nauseous at his words, in a way that's familiar, and he almost welcomes that suffering, as his own panic filled mind comes to a screeching halt and then restarts.

Still, the thought of leaving is sudden and startling, but it's the truth; he can't stay here any longer with Yusaku, with his bitter, angry, guilty feelings about himself and the things he does swimming like poison in his mouth and on top of his tongue. He feels like he might just lash out any second now, which is not ideal, and he's disappointed with himself: Ryoken was supposed to be strong on the face of every challenge put upon him, he was raised to be, to fight until he was put down, but when it came to Yusaku, things always got muddy— he was left confused, angry, lonely and regretful every time he meets the green of his eyes, every time he dared let his mind wander towards ideas of what their lives might have been like if his father never dared to do the things he did, every time he remembered how his innocent need for a friend led him to the event that ruined his life.

He just couldn't stand it— Ryoken, despite having a support system that Yusaku lacked after the Lost Incident, seemed to struggle just as much as he seemed to do when it came to his feelings, and yet unlike him, Yusaku was at least able to keep his actions focused. Where Yusaku has arguably made the best out of his mental struggle by finding a way to keep himself energized and confident, even if it was with questionable reasons, Ryoken has hesitated, stepped back, stayed quiet and observant for years, pleased to follow his father's leadership in looking for the Ignis and pretending like the guilt and the self-hate wasn't eating him inside. He's better now, and he struggles to identify why – he's not ready to accept that his father's death might have something to do with that – but Yusaku's always been his weak point, and his newfound command over every single one of Hanoi's actions as well as his reborn determination, didn't seem to matter at all, or to do much about that. The protection program, keeping his identity a secret, suggesting a truce— they were all decisions he took half out of necessity and planning to make sure they win this war, and half out of a selfish desire to get closer to him and to make up for the pain he's caused.

Yusaku apologizes like he has any reason to be sorry, almost making him want to shake some sense into him, and Ryoken lets the little assistant robot

take care of bringing him some water - so those are useful, after all, who knew - knowing that what comes next won't make him feel any better. Looking into Yusaku's eyes, Ryoken almost swallows down his words, but it needs to be done. He can't stay

"I think I should leave," he says, and Yusaku has no outright reaction but the minute twitch of his mouth before nodding quietly, apparently not interested in forcing another situation that could get out of control. He planned to leave it there, to just pick up and go away, but the question is nagging him restlessly, and he needs the answer, even if it's a lie. "Will you be okay by yourself?"

Yusaku gives him an affirmative that sounds just as fake as Ryoken was expecting it to be, and he barely keeps himself from disagreeing with his statement that he needs to be alone, when that's probably the last thing that he should be. But Ryoken can't make that decision, can't claim he knows what's best after what just happened, so, instead, with little hesitation, he bites his tongue and helps Yusaku up quickly but safely, stepping away carefully, then starts to prepare his leave by picking up the mess the living room is, staling by doing the dishes and folding the blankets. It should have been easy, he thinks, to turn his back on Yusaku and avoid his eyes, to pretend like what happened was unimportant, but it wasn't. He's so, so weak, lack the backbone his father tried to make him have to care too little about others, and it is that what makes him turn back at the door and take in the state Yusaku was left in messy hair, face puffy, eyes trained on one spot towards Ryoken like he didn't have the strength to look anywhere else.

He feels cold inside, like all of the vents of the evening that served to make him relax were wiped away from him. It's actually more of a cold realization that he can't do this ever again, that he can't risk himself, and more importantly in several ways, Yusaku; to affect him like this, to be this reckless over something he knew was dangerous just because he wanted the information was a shameful act, an action he never wanted to see repeated ever again. He should never be allowed to handle such a delicate situation ever again, or to offer any comfort, because he just didn't have the right, and that was the pure, unaltered truth.

He puts up a front for Yusaku, trying to appear unaffected, but he knows it must look as fake as he feels, and he can't even get himself to care. He's tired of his own bullshit, but he doesn't have it in him to do something about it. "If I find something of interest I'll make sure to notify you."

He's never wanted to cringe at his own voice ever before quite like he wants to now, the lie burning his lips— if he finds something else, he will say nothing and just have his Knights look it over. In fact, he might not even touch that again by himself, if his mood didn't improve in the next couple of hours, which was likely.

Yusaku's voice is rough when he answers, and Ryoken stares for a few seconds, again lingering in a space he was never supposed to visit in the first place, marking his presence in a part of *Playmaker's* life he should have never allowed himself to be in, feeling like this warrants another answer, but his tongue is heavy and his words are meaningless and unwanted. So, instead, he turns around and leaves, feeling dread crawl up his neck and the distinct, oh so familiar feeling that he just made a mistake, but this won't do— the sight of Yusaku breaking down, the absolute terror in his eyes, is nothing but a cruel reminder of what his life is, what he's meant to do, who he is and who he needs to be. He has a mission to accomplish, a legacy to end, and a promise to keep, but even as he repeats this to himself over and over again as he makes the ride back to the mansion, leaves the car in the garage, and reenters the boat, they do nothing to make him feel better.

Nauseous, Ryoken ignores the confused looks and questions of his lieutenants at his grim expression and just shoves the laptop with the info at them, locking himself in his cabin, sitting down on his bed, and burying his face in his hand for an undefined amount of time. He needs to calm down and get over it, to focus on what's important, because otherwise, he'll start making more mistakes to add to his long list of regrets, but achieves the contrary—

He doesn't sleep a wink.

**Author's Note:**

Thanks for reading!

I may add more to this work depending on how things go in the future with other installments, but for now nothing is sure.